Catalogue no. 98-312-X2011003

Census in Brief

Fifty years of families in Canada: 1961 to 2011

Families, households and marital status, 2011 Census of Population

Statistics Canada Statistique Canada

Canada

Introduction

During the 50-year period from 1961 to 2011 which corresponded with the censuses of population, considerable social and economic changes occurred in Canada that influenced evolving family dynamics.

The early 1960s was near the end of the baby-boom period (1946 to 1965), when many people married at a fairly young age and had relatively large families. By the end of the 1960s, events such as the legalization of the birth control pill, the introduction of 'no fault' divorce, as well as the growing participation of women in higher education and in the paid labour force may have contributed to delayed family formation, smaller family size and an increased diversity of family structures.

The concepts and measurements used in the census have changed over time to reflect this diversity (see Box 1).

Box 1 Timeline of conceptual changes by census year

1981: First year data are available for common-law unions.

2001: Same-sex common-law couples are first counted.

Also in 2001, the census family concept is broadened to include:

- children in census family who were previously married
- skip-generation families (grandparents and grandchildren in the same dwelling and without the presence of a middle-generation parent)
- a child and his/her lone parent (middle generation) living in a three-generation household. Prior to 2001, the two older generations would have formed a census family.

2006: Same-sex married couples are first counted, following the legalization of same-sex marriage across Canada in 2005.

2011: Couples with children can be classified as intact families or stepfamilies.

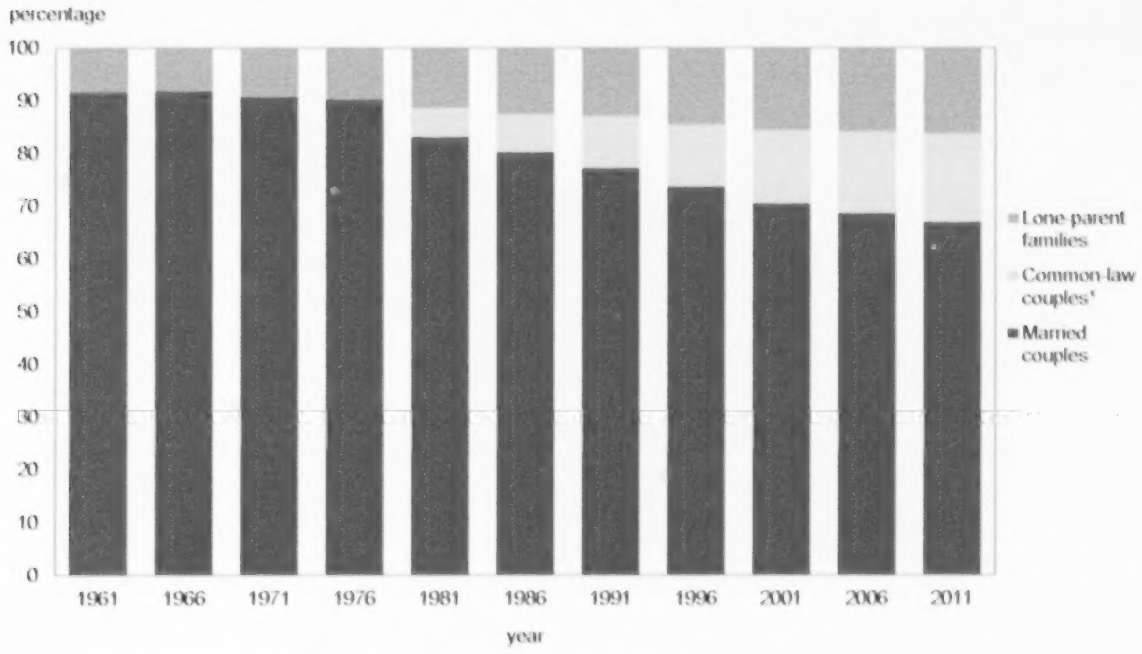
For more information on census family concepts, see the 2011 Census Dictionary, Catalogue no. 98-301-X.

Over time, the share of married-couple families has decreased

The number of census families in Canada—married couples, common-law couples and lone-parent families—more than doubled between 1961 and 2011, from 4.1 million families in 1961 to 9.4 million families in 2011.

In 1961, married couples accounted for 91.6% of census families (Figure 1). By 2011, this proportion had declined to 67.0%. This decrease was mostly a result of the growth of common-law couples.

Figure 1 Distribution (in percentage) of census families by family structure, Canada, 1961 to 2011



Notes: Historical comparisons for census families, particularly lone-parent families, must be interpreted with caution due to conceptual changes in 2001. For more information, see 'Concepts and Definitions' in *Family Portrait: Continuity and Change in Canadian Families and Households in 2006, 2006 Census*.

1. Data on common-law couples are not available prior to the 1981 Census.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1961 to 2011.

While the number of married couples rose 19.7% over the 30-year period between 1981 and 2011, the number of common-law couples more than quadrupled (+345.2%).

Data on common-law couples were available for the first time from the 1981 Census of Population, and they represented 5.6% of all census families that year. Since then, the proportion of common-law couples has grown steadily to 16.7% of all census families in 2011. In fact, for the first time in 2011, the number of common-law couple families in the country surpassed the number of lone-parent families (1,567,910 compared to 1,527,840).

The share of lone-parent families has increased

In 2011, lone-parent families represented 16.3% of all census families. This was almost double the share of 8.4% in 1961 when relatively more childbearing took place within marriage and divorce rates were lower (see Box 2).

Box 2 Canadian Families: 1911 to 1961

While today's census families are characterized by diversity, this was also the case for families in the first half of the 20th Century, but often for different reasons.

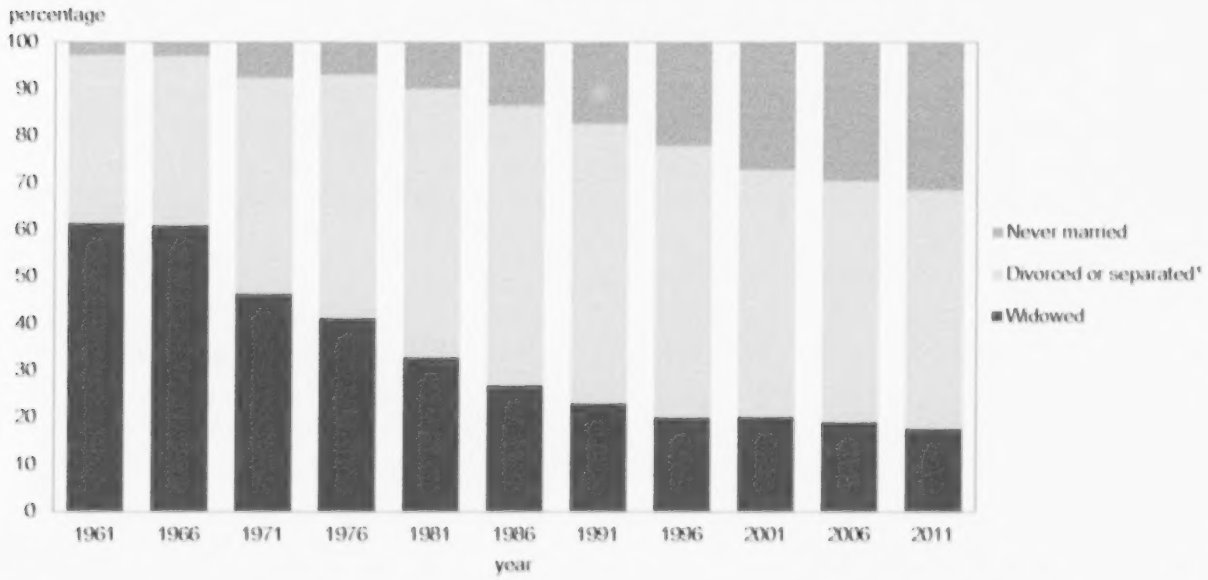
Widowhood and remarriage following the death of a spouse were more common in the early decades of the 1900s, when there was higher maternal mortality and higher mortality rates overall for infants, children and adults. There were also many deaths which occurred during the two world wars and the Korean War. In 1921, for example, nearly 1 in 10 children aged 14 and under (8.8%) had experienced the death of at least one parent. As a result, lone-parent families were relatively prevalent in the early decades of the 20th Century. These families represented 12.2% of all census families in 1941; a level that was higher than in 1961 (8.4%), near the height of the baby boom, and that was not surpassed again until 1986.

Note: For more information, see A. Milan. 2000. 'One hundred years of families'. *Canadian Social Trends* no. 56. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-008.

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941, 1961 and 1961.

The ratio of female lone-parent families to male lone-parent families has been fairly constant over the past 50 years at about 4 to 1. While the sex distribution of lone-parent families changed little between 1961 and 2011, the legal marital status of lone parents evolved considerably during this time (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Distribution (in percentage) of the legal marital status of lone parents, Canada, 1961 to 2011



Note:
1. Divorced or separated category includes 'married, spouse absent.'

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1961 to 2011.

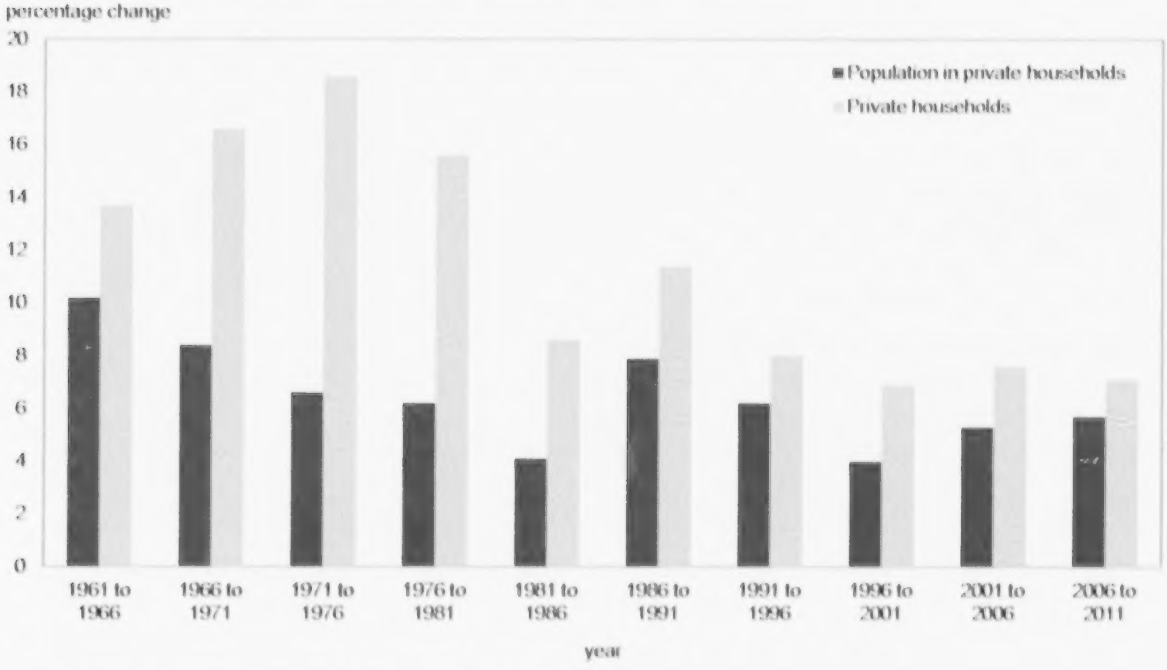
In 1961, the majority of lone parents (61.5%) were widowed, a small proportion (2.7%) reported never having been married and the remaining 35.8% were divorced or separated.[1] Over time, the proportion of widowed lone parents declined steadily, accompanied by an increase in the prevalence of never-married or divorced lone parents. By 2011, the most common legal marital status for lone parents was divorced or separated (50.8%), followed by a more than ten-fold increase for those who were never married (31.5%), while 17.7% of all lone parents were widowed.

Families and households have become smaller

Canadian families have become smaller over time. This occurred partly because of a decline in the total fertility rate after the baby boom and the fact that lone-parent families increased in recent decades. The average number of children per family decreased from 2.7 in 1961 to 1.9 in 2011.[2] During the same period, the average number of people per family declined from 3.9 in 1961 to 2.9 in 2011.

While family size declined over the period, the number of households increased. In each 5-year period between 1961 and 2011, the number of private households grew faster than the population, particularly between 1966 and 1981 (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Percentage change in the population in private households and in the number of private households, Canada, 1961 to 1966 to 2006 to 2011

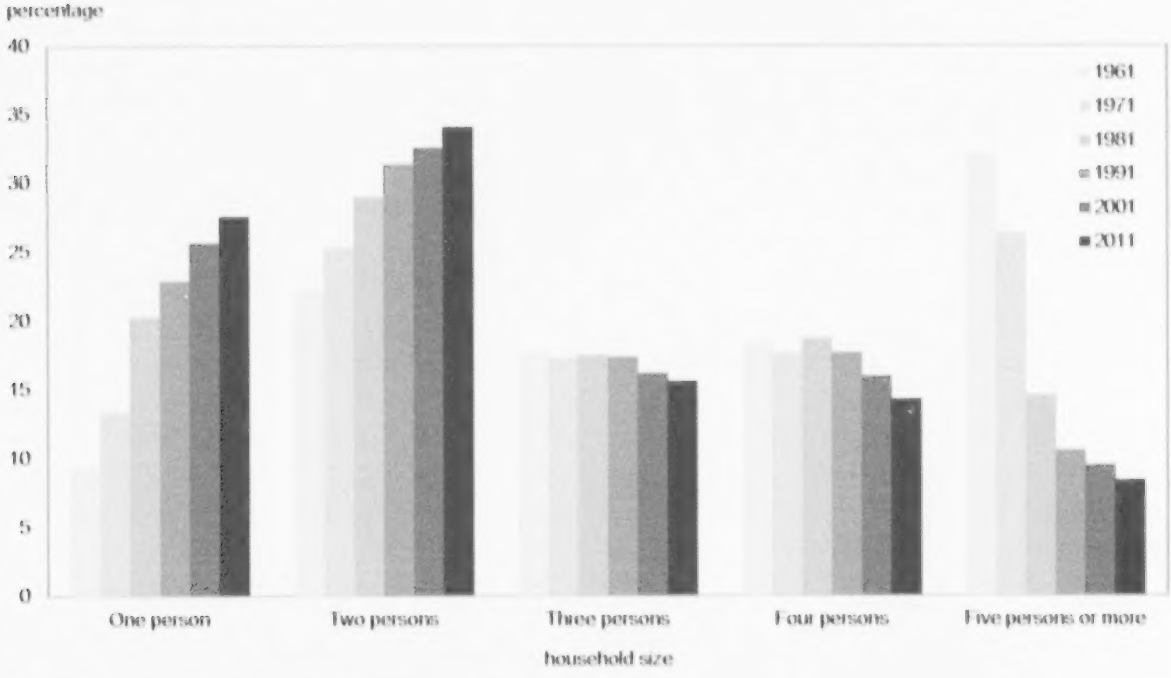


Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1961 to 2011.

1 Divorced or separated category includes 'married, spouse absent' in 1961 and in 2011.
2 In 1961, the average number of children per family is calculated for families with all children aged 24 and under whereas in 2011, it is calculated for families with at least one child aged 24 and under.

Households have also become smaller in recent decades. This has been due largely to increased shares of one- and two-person households and to decreases in the proportion of large households comprised of five or more people. The 1981 Census marked the first time that one-person households surpassed households of five or more people (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Distribution (in percentage) of private households by household size, Canada, 1961 to 2011



Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population, 1961 to 2011.

In 2011, households consisting of one person accounted for 27.6% of all households, about a three-fold increase from 9.3% in 1961. During the same period, the share of large households comprised of five people or more decreased from 32.3% in 1961 to 8.4% in 2011.

There are many reasons which may account for households becoming smaller and for households growing more rapidly than the population. Smaller households may result from lower fertility or no children present in the home, either because household members have never had children, have had fewer children or their children have grown and established their own independent households. In addition, relatively high rates of separation and divorce are likely to produce two smaller households after the dissolution of a previously larger one.

Larger share of persons not in census families

The proportion of persons living outside of census families (including living alone, with relatives and with non-relatives only) increased over the 50-year period from 1961 to 2011. In 1961, 8.6% of the total population in private households did not live in a census family. By 2011, this share had increased to 17.1%. Throughout the entire period, the majority of people who did not live in census families were living alone,[3] with smaller proportions living with relatives or with non-relatives. Over time, living alone has grown steadily in prevalence among the population aged 15 and over, from 3.5% in 1961 to 13.5% in 2011, at least partially as a result of population aging.

Note to readers

Random rounding and percentage distributions: To ensure the confidentiality of responses collected for the 2011 Census while maintaining the quality of the results, a random rounding process is used to alter the values reported in individual cells. As a result, when these data are summed or grouped, the total value may not match the sum of the individual values, since the total and subtotals are independently rounded. Similarly, percentage distributions, which are calculated on rounded data, may not necessarily add up to 100%.

Due to random rounding, counts and percentages may vary slightly between different census products, such as the analytical document, highlight tables, and topic-based tabulations.

Additional information

Additional information on specific geographies can be found in the Highlight tables, Catalogue no. 98-312-X2011002, Topic-based tabulations, Catalogue no. 98-312-X2011017 through 98-312-X2011046, as well as in the new census product Focus on Geography Series, Catalogue no. 98-310-X2011004.

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3. The living alone population, as classified by the census, refers to persons aged 15 and over.

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